

A Student-Centered Culture of Improvement: The Case of Garden Grove Unified School District

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Executive Summary

This case study of the culture of improvement in the Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) is part of a broader set of reports on findings from the CORE-PACE Research Partnership's developmental evaluation in 2018-19. The research in 2018-19 focused on elevating lessons about how educators learn continuous improvement and the organizational conditions that support continuous improvement work in schools and districts. This report is part of a set of three case studies. This case describes GGUSD's structures and processes that develop coherence throughout the district and support a culture of improvement.

Staff across the GGUSD point to the organizational culture—a culture that puts kids first; nurtures commitment, drive, and loyalty among teachers and district staff; and views both student and adult learning as important—as the driver for the district's sustained growth. In this case study we examine four structures and processes district leadership used in Garden Grove to establish and maintain this productive culture of improvement:

1. The district focuses on three consistent goals to build commitment and trust around its "North Star" of improving student outcomes, deliberately moving slowly to work towards them, and involving all adults in the system.
2. GGUSD uses data to identify areas of needed reform and is building out data systems to provide more accurate analytic feedback on districtwide and school-specific initiatives.
3. GGUSD uses vertical and horizontal structures to maintain coherence and allow information to flow in many directions throughout the district, of which a cadre of teachers on special assignment (TOSAs) are the central component.
4. The district prioritizes people and focuses resources on finding and keeping skilled personnel and developing high-quality teachers.

The lessons learned from GGUSD have broad implications for California districts seeking to support a culture of improvement. While some circumstances of GGUSD differ from other districts (e.g., a leadership team that has been in place for many years), it serves a student population that is similar to many other districts in California. The lessons we put forth here could be implemented in many districts by changing leadership approaches and reallocating existing resources. While many questions remain about how continuous improvement develops across varying contexts, understanding aspects of how GGUSD has steadily focused on student success to achieve growth over time will shed light on how districts could use or modify existing structures and processes to create a culture of continuous improvement.

Introduction

The *CORE Districts* (referred to hereafter as *CORE*) is a nonprofit organization created in 2010 to foster collaboration between eight of California’s largest districts.¹ In 2018-19, *CORE* provided a range of supports to participating districts, including programs to support multiple levels of district and school leaders in developing improvement capability and coaching for school-based improvement leaders and Local Improvement Teams. This case examines the structures, processes, and organizational culture at the heart of a California district—Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD)—that has seen steady improvement.

GGUSD serves 41,500 students at 67 school sites. The district enrolls a diverse set of students with 37 percent of the population identified as English language learners and 72 percent identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Over the past twenty years, GGUSD has made remarkable progress in improving student outcomes, achieving outcomes in mathematics, reading, and graduation rate that surpass averages in their county and the state of California overall. When compared to districts serving students with similar socioeconomic status, the extent to which GGUSD outperforms these districts is quite apparent. Figure 1 shows the academic outcomes for students in GGUSD in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) from 2001-04 through 2017-18 compared to districts in California serving students within the same income quintile as those in GGUSD (i.e., the second lowest income quintile).²

¹ This case is part of a series of four documents describing lessons learned about continuous improvement from the *CORE District’s* leadership of the *CORE* Improvement Community during 2018-19. For more information about the history of the *CORE* Districts, background on continuous improvement, and the *CORE* improvement community see: <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/learning-and-practicing-continuous-improvement-lessons-core-districts>

² On average, students in GGUSD are in the second lowest socioeconomic status quintile in California. GGUSD has consistently outperformed other districts serving socioeconomically similar students and has steadily improved since 2003-04 in both mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA).

Figure 1: California student outcomes for mathematics and English language arts (ELA) in same income quintile as GGUSD



Sources: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Smarter Balanced Test Results; California Department of Education (CDE) Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR); and CDE student poverty free- and reduced-price meals data.

Note: The break in the data comes from the year California shifted from STARS testing to CAASPP. No testing was done in the 2013-14 school year.

As the data show, student outcomes in GGUSD have been continually improving for over a decade. As a result, we elected to do a case study on GGUSD as an exemplar district for sustained continuous improvement. We found that aspects of what we observed in GGUSD align with Grunow and Park's (2019) assumptions of continuous improvement:

1. *Systems* produce outcomes
2. Change efforts focus on key *processes*
3. Progress requires continual *learning* and discovery
4. *Frontline* workers are uniquely situated to learn how to get ideas to work
5. As effective practices are discovered, they are *spread* throughout the organization (emphasis in the original)

It's notable that the district does not consistently practice a particular improvement methodology. For example, the district does not require the use of rapid cycles of inquiry (e.g., Plan Do Study Act cycles), which are the focus of many districts' improvement efforts. While not focusing on any specific tools associated with continuous improvement, GGUSD's leaders developed a culture that focuses on student success, invokes loyalty and longevity among staff, and values both student and adult learning and growth.

This case focuses on data collected through interviews and observations during the 2018-19 school year. Our goal is to use these data to describe the structures and processes that institutionalize GGUSD's approach and show how these support a culture of continuous improvement. We hope that the descriptions and examples are useful to districts and county offices of education beginning to establish a culture of sustained improvement without having all of the components of continuous improvement in place.

Methods

This case is based on data collected during the 2018-19 school year including observation of a professional development event *CORE* presented for all principals in the district and classroom observations (n=2), analysis of artifacts (e.g., district publications and strategic plans), and a total of 17 interviews: 10 semi-structured in-person interviews and 7 group interviews (which included over 30 participants) conducted with district leaders, site administrators, teachers on special assignment (TOSAs), and classroom teachers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. At the events we observed, we took observation notes and also collected agendas, event materials, and artifacts of work (e.g., poster paper where participants recorded discussions).

Analysis included several rounds of content coding of interview transcripts, observation notes, and artifacts, interspersed with regular discussions among members of the research team to surface initial hypotheses and explore potential patterns in the data within and across districts. We broadly focused our initial coding on how educators described their experiences with *CORE*, their CI approach, and their perceptions of the organizational conditions that enabled or constrained their work. We drew upon the Coherence Framework developed by the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University (n.d.) and Fullan and Quinn's (2015) Coherence Framework to create a hybrid heuristic tool to examine existing district and school conditions and their inter-relationships. Next, we used Grunow and Park's (2019) five features of CI to examine the range of approaches districts were taking to work towards their overall goals. We coded all data with these categories and then developed case-ordered descriptive matrices comparing the districts (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). From these we developed major themes about the continuous improvement approaches across the sites.

Lessons Learned

Analysis of our 2018-19 data revealed four lessons about how Garden Grove Unified School District has built and maintained a student-centered culture of improvement through using consistent goals, reliable data, structures and processes that build coherence, and prioritizing the development and retention of highly effective staff.

Lesson 1: The district focuses on three consistent goals to build commitment and trust around its "North Star" of improving student outcomes, deliberately moving slowly to work towards them, and involving all adults in the system.

When people talk about vision and clarity of focus in an organization, they sometimes reference the idea of the "North Star"—the guiding light that enables an

organization to stay on course. In GGUSD, the North Star is a consistent focus on students. District leaders spoke about partnering with parents and feeling a responsibility to stand *in loco parentis*—to think as parents do about the kids in the district. The superintendent said, “I’ve always believed *in loco parentis*, and that is really at the base of the ‘Garden Grove way’, I think...that reminder of, is this good enough for my child?” Another leader spoke about the same internal guideline as she explained how she dealt with uneven instructional quality, saying, “The thing that really drove me a lot was, would I allow [my child] to have this teacher?...If I wouldn’t tolerate [the instruction] as a mom, how can I tolerate that [in my current position]? I can’t.” The strong moral imperative to make decisions that best serve students is a fundamental part of the district culture.

The central focus is operationalized into GGUSD’s three goals.

- Goal 1: Academic Skills: All learners will develop the academic skills necessary for continual individual growth towards mastery of standards.
- Goal 2: Personal Skills: All learners will develop the personal skills necessary to achieve academic and social goals.
- Goal 3: Lifelong Success: All learners will be prepared for lifelong success in their intended career paths.³

Goals 1 and 3 originate with the prior superintendent’s leadership in 1997-98. Goal 2 was announced in the 2013-14 strategic plan based on feedback, research, and data that highlighted the critical role of personal/social-emotional skills on student success. The current superintendent expects these goals to remain in place for the duration of her tenure and probably beyond.

The district focuses all work on these goals and communicates the message that decisions from the central office will be coherent and deliberate. The superintendent emphasizes that, “Anything we do, it has to be connected to one of the three goals.” For anything new, the approach is always, “Let’s connect [it to] the things that we already have.” Leaders consider how new language, initiatives, and training fit into what already exists in the district, and practice what one district leader described as “weaving, not stacking,” that is making new efforts feel familiar and manageable through maintaining a coherent and aligned focus on students and student outcomes. Because goals remain consistent, teachers and principals can develop their understanding and competencies over time without fear that, as is the case with reforms in many other districts, objectives and goals are just another “flavor of the month” that the district will suddenly change.

In addition to focusing on their three goals, district leaders also resist moving quickly from solution to solution or being an early adopter for unproven solutions. An

³ GGUSD 2013-14 Strategic Plan and GGUSD 2018-19 Annual Report.

analogy we heard repeatedly was that of slowly turning a large ship: “There’s so much out there that one can do or say...[but] it’s about looking at Garden Grove...as a cruise liner, and that if you take sharp turns, whether it’s to the right or left we will capsize...” Instead, leaders are deliberate, relying on research and input and piloting programs in one or two sites. One principal said, “I don’t think that our district ever asks teachers to do anything that’s not research-based...when they do invest the time or the money or the energy... into any change, they want it to go well and [to] be able to provide the supports necessary to make it successful.” In line with the assumptions about the spread of continuous improvement, only once a program or initiative has demonstrated consistent success in pilot schools will the district rollout initiatives at scale. Another principal explained the effect slow roll-outs have:

Even when a centralized idea comes down... there’s always a meeting that says, ‘We have this idea.’ It’s always talked about to the principals, and it’s talked about to the assistant principals [in] meetings and it’s talked about at the department chair meetings and then they usually have some sort of opening meeting to get everybody’s feedback... I feel like it’s such a long rollout, nothing’s ever like, ‘Here you go.’ It takes forever. By then, everybody’s heard of it, so it’s not a shock.

The “weaving” and the gradual introductions create a culture in which the central office is not perceived of as an unpredictable entity springing things on teachers and principals—as is a common perception in districts functioning less well—but instead as a partner focused on student success. By consistently avoiding the temptations of fads or silver bullets and instead approaching the district goals methodically and thoughtfully, district leaders have increased the level of trust and commitment between teachers, administrators, and the central office.

Lesson 2: GGUSD uses data to identify areas of needed reform and is building out data systems to provide more accurate analytic feedback on districtwide and school-specific initiatives.

Districts across the state of California regularly use data for monitoring student outcomes through the California dashboard, but the use of data is well-documented in GGUSD and extends beyond monitoring student outcomes (Hough, Byun, and Mulfinger, 2018; Phillips, Reber, and Rothstein, 2018; Fullan and Quinn, 2015; Wohlstetter, Datnow, and Park, 2008). GGUSD consistently uses data to assess progress around district goals and determine where to focus improvement efforts. For example, a 2006 audit found that inconsistent course placement processes were severely limiting the A-G completion rates for English learners, low-income students, students of color, and students in special

education.⁴ GGUSD leaders wrote an internal description (see Appendix A) of the process they used to address this issue, which resulted in the creation of the *GGUSD Placement Guidelines*. In summary, the district analyzed their existing process and found three places where students were most likely to fall out of the A-G completion pipeline. They then changed the system to plug those holes in the process, which led to improved student outcomes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Changing the A-G process

System Problem	New Structure or Process
Course placement (which tended to place equivalently qualified Latinx students in less challenging courses than other students)	After analyzing data to see which factors predicted student success in challenging courses, district leaders used those factors to implement consistent data-based placement guidelines across all district high schools. Students are placed in coursework based on objective measures (state and local assessments) versus teacher recommendation (which were found to be highly subjective). Initial placement recommendations are made at the district level, with schools having to justify changes based on individual situations.
Placement in non-eligible courses or slow course sequences (e.g., students taking science courses that did not meet any A-G requirements or a two-year Algebra 1 sequence)	The district eliminated almost all classes that did not meet A-G requirements (e.g., 4th year math classes for kids at risk of not graduating that were not A-G approved) and the Board approved a new list of classes.
Students receiving Ds in A-G eligible classes (students could pass a class with a D, but the class then did not count as meeting an A-G requirement)	Creation of “D-Validation” (for students who need a way to improve their grade to a C) and “credit recovery” programs on each high school campus.

The district reported that implementing *GGUSD’s Placement Guidelines* led to an increase in student A-G rates for Latinx students from 9 percent to 48 percent and for all students from 28.9 percent to 57.5 percent, with the gap between socioeconomically disadvantaged students and all students shrinking to 3.1 percent, well below both the county and state averages. A district leader stated:

It was [a focus on] equity and access for all of our kids, which just skyrocketed our A-G rate, skyrocketed our AP success, passing rates, and the number of AP classes kids would take, where we’re highest in the county, compared to even...the wealthy districts...We surpassed them.

⁴ A-G requirements are a sequence of fifteen courses students must take and make a grade of C or better in to be eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU). These requirements include 2 years of history/social science, 4 years of English, 3 years of math, 2 years of lab science, 2 years of a language other than English, 1 year of visual and performing arts, and 1 college preparatory elective

A similar approach has been used in GGUSD to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and graduation rates for specific student populations.

The district office provides customized data reports to each school twice a year and individual teams are expected to consistently utilize additional data to guide their work. These data come from both external, district-administered sources as well as school-based data collection and sharing structures. Site teams referenced the use of Interim Assessment Benchmarks (IABs)—quarterly tests administered by the district to assess student academic growth—as rulers for gauging the effectiveness of implemented strategies addressing particular student outcomes. Teachers and administrators reported using the results of these benchmarks to identify priority areas and continually improve supports for students.

The district is also working to build the capabilities of school and district leaders in continuous improvement. Twenty-two individuals from GGUSD attended *CORE's* Local Improvement Facilitator Training (LIFT), which provides training on how to lead teams that are using continuous improvement approaches to improve outcomes.⁵ A TOSA participating in LIFT described the training's impact on their work supporting site level teams as:

We're always learning, we're always at a place where we can do something better, and I think continuous improvement gives the structure of how to think through that process and... the steps that we're able to take... [T] here are a lot of places that are doing [improvement work] but having this framework of continuous improvement and the work through improvement science and LIFT, gives kind of a formal structure for [site level teams] and [TOSAs].

The data collection and analysis tools learned from *CORE's* continuous improvement trainings (e.g., empathy interviews) were being used to assess the impact of newly implemented changes. GGUSD also asked *CORE* staff to present continuous improvement strategies at a districtwide principal training focused on effective data use to continue growing the data capacity at individual sites. Both district and site leaders highlighted the need to expand data collection and dissemination strategies as a growth area for the district.

⁵ For more information about Local Improvement Facilitator Training (LIFT), see *Learning and practicing school improvement: Lessons from the CORE Districts* (Gallagher and Cottingham, 2019).

Lesson 3: GGUSD uses vertical and horizontal structures to maintain coherence and allow information to flow in many directions throughout the district, of which a cadre of teachers on special assignment (TOSAs) are the central component.

GGUSD's cadre of 77 TOSAs played a central role in building coherence across the district.⁶ Central to understanding TOSAs' work is knowing that GGUSD sees itself as a very "centralized" district. Yet, although schools are expected to work towards district goals, schools are provided flexibility in how to achieve those goals. Additionally, the district creates channels for principal and teacher input on the supports school staff need to reach the goals. TOSAs are central in making this system work because they: 1) disseminate information to site staff regarding district initiatives, 2) provide site-specific support to facilitate instructional improvement at two schools each year, and 3) capture learning and feedback from sites to share with district leadership to inform current implementation and future initiatives. TOSAs accomplish these three roles by engaging in both district- and school-level work.

District-level TOSA work. The district TOSAs support two structures that move district-level initiatives out into the sites: grade-level head meetings and instructional leadership team meetings. Districtwide, grade-level head meetings convene two times a month to directly engage with teachers from each school.⁷ These meetings bring together all 242 grade-level heads from sites across the district and provide training around key focus areas—about ten to twelve issue areas per year—identified by district leadership and through conversations with site-level staff. Participants are then expected to share that information with their site teams and work with TOSAs to effectively implement strategies that are suitable for their context. TOSAs also conduct Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) meetings, which prepare site leadership teams to implement district initiatives and ensure alignment with ongoing work at each school. These teams generally meet twice a month at each site and are brought together by the district six times a year to work with teams from other schools around a particular issue.⁸ Both the grade-level chair and ILT meetings provide a setting for TOSAs to synthesize what they have observed supporting school sites

⁶ In 2018-19, the cohort of TOSAs was differentiated into three roughly equal groups. These groupings can shift depending on site needs each year. Approximately one third of TOSAs work with grades K-6, a third with grades 7-12, and a third work in specific departments such as new teacher induction, special education, and technology. The TOSAs are described as "quasi administrative" because they serve both as district staff helping to determine districtwide goals and providing training to teachers and principals while also serving as support staff at sites. Additionally, TOSAs have no role in evaluating the principals and teachers they support, and only serve as partners developing solutions to problems of practice, which creates a safe space for site staff to assess their own practice and test new ideas.

⁷ Grade-level chairs meet in four differentiated grade-level groupings: kindergarten-2nd grade, 3rd-6th, 7th-9th, and 10th-12th.

⁸ Sites have flexibility in how they use their staff meeting times on Wednesdays, but most schools opt to have their ILT meetings twice a month.

and present that information to site staff, including highlighting examples of successful implementation. It also provides an opportunity for sites to share their learning, problem solve with other leaders, and begin scaling successful interventions across sites addressing similar issues.

The district relies heavily on TOSAs to capture learning from sites and share it “up the chain” with district leadership to inform future initiatives. An example of this is the process used to determine areas that will be addressed in grade-level meetings each year. TOSAs first collect a list from grade-level heads of what their teams most need support around. This list is presented to principals who narrow the number of topic areas. Finally, TOSAs and district-level instructional leaders further consolidate the list to a manageable number of topics, which TOSAs use to develop and curate resources for the following year. This process ensures that voices from each site—including teachers and administrators—have input into the supports offered for attaining districtwide goals. Instructional directors that oversee the TOSAs also meet regularly with school leadership to ensure there is a clear understanding of district initiatives and determine what support schools need to continue improving, but TOSAs form the backbone of district-to-site implementation and site-to-district communication.

School site support. TOSAs use a wide range of strategies to support teams, including conducting literature scans on best practices, facilitating additional trainings, modeling lessons, providing opportunities for peer observation, and creating additional lesson materials. TOSAs approach their work with a capacity-building mindset as opposed to acting as experts telling sites what they should and should not do. One TOSA explained the importance of building strong relationships:

Globally, the work that our TOSA team does is really try to build strong relationships with the schools and teachers, so that anything that we’re dealing with on a district level... runs through our... TOSAs... I think globally, the TOSA team really looks at what our district vision and goals are, any initiatives that are coming out, and how that impacts instruction and our teachers, and how we can support them.

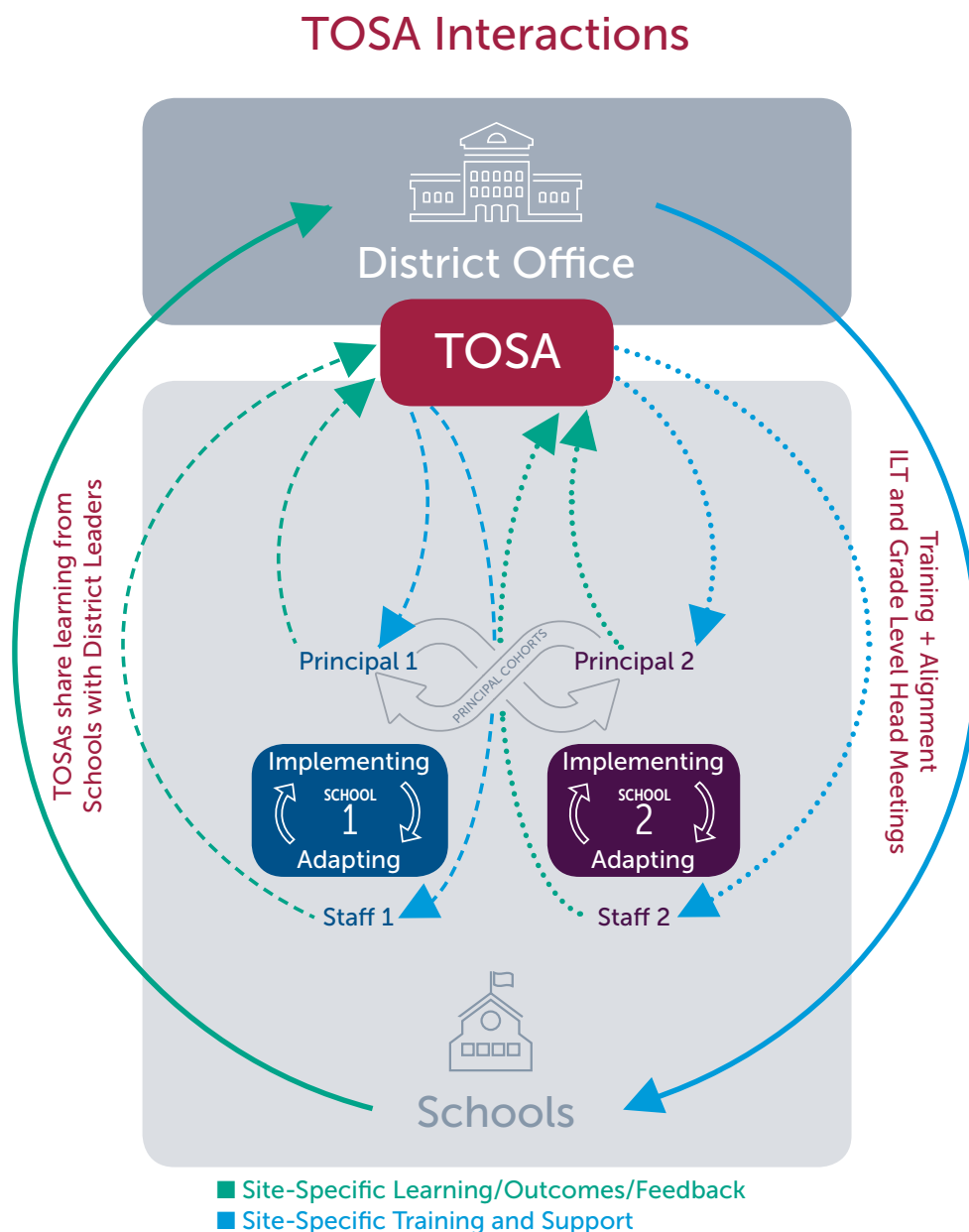
Establishing strong relationships enables TOSAs to disseminate information to site staff regarding district initiatives and builds trust between the district and sites.

TOSAs continuously build coherence across the district ensuring that site work is aligned to the focal topics in the district-led ILTs and grade-level head meetings. One TOSA described the reactions of grade-level chairs attending the district-led ILTs and how the teachers noticed aspects of the training closely mirrored what they were already working on at their school:

We would often go to grade-level chair meetings and hear teachers come back saying, '[Our Principal] had already told us that.' That was helping them understand we weren't giving them anything new. We weren't trying to add to their plate. We were trying to support what was already on the plate.

The multiple touch points TOSAs have with sites supports coherence horizontally and vertically across all of the school sites and is an essential component that helps to steer the entire GGUSD "ship" in the same direction. Figure 3 visually represents how the TOSAs: 1) establish feedback loops between site-level staff and district leadership, 2) promote horizontal communication across district departments and sites, and 3) support multidirectional communication between school sites and district leadership.

Figure 3. The role of TOSAs in Garden Grove Unified School District



The TOSAs work in tandem with other structures and processes that ensure coherence at both the district office and school level. At the district level, leaders use regular meetings to facilitate the sharing of ongoing and prospective work horizontally across traditionally siloed organizational units. Each week the superintendent and all leaders who report directly to her—assistant superintendents and their directors—meet to share progress on initiatives in their individual departments and coordinate work streams across the district office. The superintendent also holds individual meetings with each assistant superintendent for two hours a week to get more information on departmental activities and provide individualized support around pressing issues. All of these points of contact ensure the superintendent is well informed about what is occurring in the district and can aid in alignment of district initiatives across departments. Similar forms of communication are led by directors that support assistant superintendents in the district office as well as at school sites through meetings for principal cohort convenings (i.e., meetings for principals leading similar schools). Even with a variety of communication processes in place, district leaders acknowledged there is room for continued development of coherence-building structures across GGUSD and the district is working to continue improving this area.

Lesson 4: The district prioritizes people and focuses resources on finding and keeping skilled personnel and developing high-quality teachers.

The district puts time, training, and financial resources into cultivating an effective, stable, satisfied teaching force who are committed to Garden Grove and its students. As the main influencers of students' experiences and outcomes, teachers are supported and listened to, and they feel valued and treated professionally. One teacher attested to how this focus comes through in trainings:

They treat you with respect. I don't know how else to put it...Even though you know... you're supposed to go do this... it never feels like this forced thing... [T]he way they do their trainings and the way they treat you.... They don't ever want to push something on teachers. It's always something they want you to buy into and to want to do. They're really big on collaboration, which is something I had been looking for. It's been a blessing being here.

Beyond the peer-like training the district strives for in its formal trainings, many leaders maintain a personal connection with teachers and staff (e.g., the superintendent regularly participates in subbing and co-teaching with teachers). Several department and cabinet-level leaders described the importance of knowing all of their staff on a first name basis.

The district has also intentionally created spaces for teacher voices to participate in discussions with district-level leadership including various committees and meetings that allow teachers to provide input, feedback, and content for district training, decisions, and implementation. Keeping a hand on the pulse of teachers and site staff helps district

leaders establish dependable lines of communication and trust. These vertical lines of communication, undergirded by the strong professional relationships that GGUSD leaders intentionally build, contribute to the culture of improvement.

Finally, GGUSD has pathways to recruit and develop high-quality teachers, administrators, and system leaders. These pathways lead to a remarkable longevity in personnel and culture over time that sustain the “Garden Grove Way.” The pathways support the district’s ability to plan improvement that outlasts any given leader’s tenure. The former superintendent, who helped frame the central office’s role in developing personnel, said “If teachers are in charge of building student capacity, then principals need to be helping...[build] teacher capacity. The district needs to help build principal capacity. As superintendent, I realized I’m chief capacity builder.”

Critical to helping teachers feel valued has been the district’s resolve to make financial decisions that protect teacher compensation. Leaders are proud of high average-teacher salaries, which they reported are consistently in the three highest averages in the region (which includes several more affluent districts). Linked with the high teacher salaries is remarkable fiscal discipline that has allowed the district to weather economic uncertainty without large losses of personnel. Leaders describe the district as fiscally conservative, ascribing to the former superintendent’s philosophy of, “You can have anything you want; you can’t have everything you want.” Crucially, this conservatism has helped the district avoid negative impacts to personnel that have plagued most other California districts during the last several economic downturns. An assistant superintendent, who has been in the district for nearly three decades, stressed how this perspective on finances is deeply embedded in district culture:

We have always been fiscally conservative. Other districts have at one time or another, but we’ve consistently been that way. And that’s allowed us obviously—we always put students first in our decision-making process—but it’s also helped us avoid layoffs. And everybody knows what [a round of layoffs] does to morale, what that does to all of your best plans and actions that you have in your district. And [in the]... almost 30 years I’ve been here [we’ve been able to] avoid layoffs.

Financial decisions have been made with an eye toward student success; leaders report that programs and projects that didn’t support student success were not funded. They point to older school buildings that were only recently renovated after 50 years and the lack of fancy amenities in the central office, emphasizing how this degree of discipline has allowed the district to fund its biggest priority: high-quality teachers.⁹ Focusing the

⁹ It is important to note that districts across California experience tremendous variation in the resources they have available. These examples are not meant to endorse fiscal conservatism as a solution for all districts but are intended to provide several examples of decisions the district made around resource allocation and how a consistent emphasis on developing and retaining high-quality staff in alignment with improving student outcomes influenced those decisions.

district's fiscal strategy around high-quality teachers as a lever for improving student outcomes has led to high rates of teacher retention and is evident in the remarkable levels of experience found in the cabinet, TOSAs, administrators, and teachers.

The stability and high morale of personnel who feel valued contributes to the success of leadership pathways that inspire teachers to become TOSAs, administrators, and district leaders. District leaders consciously coach those who have the ability and desire to become administrators or work in the central office. At the cabinet level, succession planning is a formal GGUSD board policy. As one leader said, "We're doing a lot of mentorship of our team because any one of them could be the next me."

In addition to working to retain strong teachers and leaders, the district has been working to deliberately bring in more teachers and leaders that racially and culturally reflect and connect with the district's students, a practice research suggests is beneficial (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Dee, 2004). An assistant superintendent explained the history of the shift:

...we look for candidates that match... [students'] linguistic and cultural backgrounds... Historically, Garden Grove was a white male run district and then became a mostly female run district. We still don't... have as much diversity as we probably would like to, but the teacher diversity [has increased]... what are we looking for in a candidate in terms of not just their skill set—we can teach them the skills—but in terms of their orientation towards children of poverty. Because the majority of our schools are schools of poverty, and they're very diverse...and [we have seen] that transformation of our teaching staff.

The work they have done seems to indeed be shifting the face of the district's teaching force. Over the past decade, the percentage of district personnel who identified as Latinx rose by 53 percent to 16 percent, and those who identified as Asian rose by 31 percent to 17 percent.¹⁰ The recruitment and leadership pathways in GGUSD have led to a remarkable longevity in personnel and culture over time that help characterize the Garden Grove Way.

Conclusion

Focusing on Garden Grove's structures and processes opens a window into how district leadership has established and maintained a culture of improvement that centers the work on students and becomes a place where educators want to stay, grow, and collaborate to improve student outcomes. What makes this case interesting is that GGUSD

¹⁰ For comparison, in 2017-18, the California Department of Education reported that 54 percent of GGUSD students were Latinx and 34 percent were Asian. (See <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>)

approaches improvement in ways that differ sharply from how many districts are currently attempting to start their continuous improvement work.

In many conversations that PACE is involved in, we see people focusing very heavily on the tools of specific improvement approaches (e.g., Plan Do Study Act, fishbone diagrams). But what this case shows is that steadily improving student outcomes can be accomplished without consistent use of any specific tools. When we examine Grunow and Park's (2019) core assumptions of continuous improvement, we see examples of a focus on systems and efforts to change key processes (e.g., the project to improve A-G rates), supports for continual learning and discovery (e.g., 77 TOSAs), evidence that when site-based teachers and leaders are given autonomy they decide how best to achieve district goals, and a willingness to deliberately examine research and conduct small pilots tests to determine effectiveness before spreading practices throughout the organization. This is not to say that these assumptions are consistently implemented across all schools and district departments, but the district has demonstrated the capacity to realize all of the assumptions.

Additionally, the GGUSD culture embodies how to answer the three questions that are central to the Model for Improvement (Langley, et al., 2009):

1. What are we trying to accomplish? (In GGUSD, three consistent goals answer that question).
2. How will we know if the change is an improvement? (In GGUSD, leaders are provided with data and expected to use it to answer that question).
3. What change can we make that will result in improvement? (GGUSD does due diligence; before widely implementing new approaches, they pilot them and only when a change is successful is it taken to scale).

These three questions are at the center of an organization that puts instructional excellence at the fore, using structures and processes to create a culture that aspires to give every child the opportunities you would want for your own children. While GGUSD is clearly a continuous improvement organization, those in the district would be the first to say that their system is imperfect, and they are committed to working hard to continue their upward trajectory. To that end, GGUSD asked *CORE* to return to provide all principals and many district leaders with a workshop designed to support school leaders in launching a yearlong investigation into an area of their choice that the state dashboard indicates is ripe for improvement.

In the meantime, this case offers some broader questions for leaders in other districts and schools to consider:

- If a district or school is starting a journey towards becoming an improvement organization, how can they focus on using improvement tools while also

establishing the essential broader organizational conditions (e.g., structures that support ongoing learning and a culture that prioritizes student outcomes and invests in teachers so they can meet those objectives) that support continuous improvement?

- Under what conditions would there be added value from conducting formal rapid cycle tests, such as Plan Do Study Act cycles?
- Not all districts have access to a senior workforce that has been intentionally developed to embrace continuous improvement like that present in GGUSD. Which aspects of GGUSD's organizational conditions should be emulated to create the right culture that encourages staff to stay and develops the type of workforce enjoyed in GGUSD?

Answering these questions and others would be an important first step as other districts study the lessons learned in Garden Grove and figure out how they could be implemented in their own local contexts.

Author Biographies

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Appendix A: Garden Grove Unified School District Placement Guidelines to Enhance College and Career Success¹¹

The courses a student takes in high school directly correlate to their options after high school. The Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) has high expectations for all students and, therefore, we systematically ensure that students in our seven comprehensive high schools are enrolled in a course of study that will open the doors of opportunity. Beyond the minimum high school graduation requirements, we strive to provide a “rigorous and supportive academic experience” that includes a course of study that meets the state’s A-G subject requirements for university admission. Over the past eight years, implementation of the GGUSD Placement Guidelines has resulted in the remarkable growth of the A-G rates for graduating high school seniors in GGUSD. These comprehensive, district-developed guidelines are based on a careful analysis of data around course access and practices in preparation for college and career success. The GGUSD Board of Education has set a clear vision and mission to guide this work:

Our GGUSD Vision: We are committed to preparing all students to be successful and responsible citizens who contribute and thrive in a diverse society.

Our GGUSD Mission: To ensure student success, we will provide a rigorous and supportive academic experience that motivates all learners to meet high expectations.

The Garden Grove Unified School District encompasses 28 square miles of territory, serving most of Garden Grove and portions of six surrounding cities—Anaheim, Cypress, Fountain Valley, Santa Ana, Stanton, and Westminster. With nearly 43,000 students, the district is the third largest among 28 public school districts in Orange County. GGUSD is both ethnically and linguistically diverse: 73 percent of students come from a second language background, primarily Spanish (42.01 percent) and Vietnamese (27.11 percent). Approximately 41 percent of students are classified as English learners, while the remaining 32 percent are reclassified fluent English proficient. As a measure of the concentration of educationally disadvantaged youth, the current unduplicated count of low-income pupils, English learners, and foster youth is 80.44 percent. A large number of GGUSD students will be the first in their families to attend college. GGUSD has long been committed to preparing all students for lifelong success and focuses efforts that will close academic achievement gaps for under-performing and under-represented student groups.

In 2005, the GGUSD A-G rate was 24 percent—well below the county (44.9 percent) and state (36.1 percent) rates. The board approved hiring a consultant to engage in an audit of grades 7-12 placement practices. The audit found significant inequities in course placement practices. For example, placement into honors and Advanced

¹¹ This explanation of GGUSD’s placement guidelines to enhance college and career success was written in 2015 and is reproduced here with the permission of GGUSD.

Placement (AP) courses relied heavily on teacher and counselor recommendations, which allowed for judgments to be made on how a student acted, rather than based on student achievement levels. Rates of enrollment in these courses were disproportionately small for Latinx students when compared to overall school demographics, even to the point where a Latinx student performing above standard on state tests would be less likely to be placed in advanced courses than a non-Latinx student performing below standard. To remedy this issue, multiple objective academic measures were analyzed to determine which student data is best correlated with student success in specific courses.

Course trajectories were also analyzed, which found that certain placement practices were preventing successful completion of A-G requirements. Specific reasons for failure to meet A-G requirements included: the placement of students in a non-eligible life science course; a two-year Algebra 1 A & B sequence; and missing required A-G electives, such as world language or visual and performing arts courses. To remedy this issue, the district adopted an expectation that all students enroll in Biology in 9th or 10th grade. Additionally, the two-year Algebra 1 A & B sequence was eliminated along with other non-eligible A-G courses to maximize placement in A-G-approved electives.

Another contributing factor to the failure to meet A-G was course grades. While a grade of “D” in a course provided credits for graduation, it did not meet A-G requirements. To address this issue, the district created opportunities for grade improvement or “D-Validation” and also conducted a four-year grading consult that created secondary grading guidelines. The district commits resources to offering credit-recovery courses at every high school campus each semester based on the needs of the school; “D-Validation” opportunities are available to those who need to repeat a course for A-G.

The external audit found evidence that placement practices varied across the district’s high schools. The need for consistent application of course placement guidelines was necessary to ensure that all students, especially those from under-represented groups, were receiving the same opportunities to enroll in the most appropriately rigorous courses to meet A-G requirements and have the greatest number of postsecondary options after high school. In the 2006-07 school year, the district implemented the *GGUSD Placement Guidelines* with the goal of providing school administrators and counselors with specific measures to be used for course placement, along with expectations for school/district practices that ensure that students are on track to complete A-G requirements. GGUSD also reviewed the course list and deleted most non-A-G courses, and the school board approved a new course list. District leadership implemented these changes with the goal of closing the achievement gap for under-performing student groups and aligning the best practices across all ten intermediate schools and seven comprehensive high schools. The development of the guidelines was an urgent need, and the data demonstrating the need helped to build a collective understanding and buy-in for this new approach to course placement.

In addition to developing the guidelines, the administration and counselors were trained to understand the processes related to course placement. *The GGUSD Placement Guidelines* are reviewed and updated annually. Initial placement recommendations are generated at the district level based on a combination of state testing results and local assessments. Teacher recommendations and grades (which are proxies for one another) are only considered as a secondary tool in unusual cases. Placement decisions are then confirmed in the fall upon availability of updated assessment data. Over the years, improvements to the district-generated placement recommendations and tools have greatly increased efficiency and accuracy of placement, with equity and course access as foundational concepts for the work.

The efforts to increase A-G rates through the use of the *GGUSD Placement Guidelines* include districtwide expectations for specific school/district practices. One such practice is the transcript audit. Every member of the administration and counseling team is expected to monitor the progress of students' A-G completion. School teams are responsible for reviewing the status of every student as "on-track" or "off-track," identifying trends or patterns, developing action plans as solutions to identified issues, planning interventions (including D-Validation opportunities), and meeting with students. This process has provided the district and schools with a deeper understanding of common obstacles to A-G completion and has led to further refinements of the *GGUSD Placement Guidelines*. The guidelines and practices, such as the transcript audit, have made a difference for students like José, who, without this process, may not have had the opportunity to be placed in 9th grade geometry; to take biology, chemistry and physics with honors; and to enroll in Advanced Placement courses. As an AVID student, he had support to help him succeed in all his rigorous courses and entered UC Irvine this fall as an engineering major.

Over the past thirteen years, GGUSD has committed resources to increasing equity and access to higher education and college/career readiness. This has included the addition of early participation in the PSAT for all 10th graders, a district-subsidized SAT preparation course, the addition of supplemental counselors, intensive training for counselors, enhancements to record keeping, the districtwide implementation of AVID at all secondary schools, and the College Boost mentoring program.

In 2014, the GGUSD A-G rate jumped to 54.4 percent, which was above the county (48.9 percent) and state (41.9 percent) rates. Among students who attended GGUSD for all four years of high school, this rate is even higher, at 61.1 percent. In addition, the gap in A-G rates between socioeconomically disadvantaged students and all students in GGUSD is 3.1 percent, whereas the county (12.8 percent) and state (9.2 percent) gaps are much larger. To illustrate the pace of growth over time, GGUSD A-G rates increased by 25.5 percent between 2006 and 2014, whereas the county increased by 4 percent,

and the state increased by 5.8 percent in the same time period. GGUSD has steadily increased the percentage of students meeting the A-G requirements—making them eligible for admission to a four-year state university, which is one of the key measures for our Strategic Plan Goal 3A: College/Career Readiness. After thirteen years, the *GGUSD Placement Guidelines* continue to exist as the comprehensive manual for equity and access in course placement. GGUSD is closing the achievement gap for under-represented student groups by increasing the A-G rate for all students, particularly those who are educationally and socioeconomically disadvantaged, placing them on a path to obtain a higher education and, ultimately, lifelong success.

GGUSD Superintendent Dr. Gabriela Mafi said, “The focus on preparing all students for college and career success has resulted in a doubling of our college preparatory rate over the last eight years and a tremendous increase in the number of students we are sending directly to four-year universities. By creating systemic approaches to course development, placement, and student support, Garden Grove Unified School District is meeting its mission of preparing all students to be successful and responsible citizens who contribute and thrive in a diverse society. “[Emphasis in the original]. GGUSD is committed to preparing all students for lifelong success and focuses efforts that will close academic achievement gaps for under-performing and under-represented student groups. The *GGUSD Placement Guidelines* to enhance college and career success have made a difference in the lives of our students.

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About

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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